Theory and Social Inquiry

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This research identifies the relation of theory with reality, knowledge and truth, from different perspectives of well-known academics and philosophers by taking into consideration the chronological order of the works at question. Theory is akin to glasses which help one see truth, knowledge and reality. The reflection and relations of truth, knowledge and reality can change according to the type of theory considered. It is conjectured that different paradigm inquiries ensure varied interpretations on theory. The paradigms of inquiry have been divided into two main segments: positivism and post-positivism are in one part, and separately, critical theory, constructivist, and participatory, form the other part of perspective interpretation of theory. Likewise, it has been shown how different types of theory in terms of theory development, ideational formulation, normativism and levels of theory are related in social science. Finally, it is emphasized that theory and practice are inseparable and they complement each other in the research.

Key Words: Theory, Social Science, Social Inquiry, Paradigms of Inquiry

The Relation of Theory with Reality, Knowledge and Truth

Before providing an explanation of theory in relation to reality, knowledge and truth, it is necessary to make clear these terms’ definitions. Most people’s usage of the terms reality, knowledge and truth in their lives is very often and automatically from memory. However, when they want to define and make clear differences between these terms, they run into some difficulties. In the history of humanity, numerous philosophers and academics have considered the task of defining reality, knowledge and truth. Socrates investigated the meaning of reality, knowledge and truth during his entire life. He evaluated human existence in two parts comprised of soul and body: soul is divine immortal, intellectual, uniform, indissoluble, and unchangeable; on the other hand, body is mortal, not intellectual, multiform, dissoluble, and changeable. According to this philosophy, body is the biggest obstacle on the journey of soul reaching reality, knowledge and truth (Plato, 1999). Reality and truth cannot be learned by using senses, which are deceptive (Mason, 2014), while only mind can learn the purest form of knowledge with the mind alone (Plato, 1999). Besides, virtue is knowledge of what are good and bad which can be taught (Plato, 2013). Plato, with the effect of Socrates’ ideas, defined the form of truth encompassing two different worlds: eternal and material ones. In the material world, truth can be seen with senses, but in the eternal world, the ability of reason helps one to see truth which is superior to the senses. According to Plato, the object of knowledge is what exists and its function to know about reality and truth can be seen as abstract while it is more obvious in the eternal world than in the material one (Plato, 1988). Aristotle rejected Plato’s form of truth and combined relativism with objectivity. (Lloyd. 2011). He referred that truth in practical matters can be seen from deeds while life and knowledge are experiential and not propositional (Chappell, T., 2012). Every know-how,
action, and choice, aim at some good and knowledge of good is the main subject of science. Aristotle divided “good” into three categories: external good, good of soul and good of body. Good of soul is mostly called as good and human virtue means soul not body. According to Aristotle, a good person always does good things (Aristotle, 2000).

Al-Farabi, whose ideas are considered succedent to Aristotle’s, believed the first aim of knowledge was reaching the knowledge of God. This knowledge helps to find the way to the ultimate aim of existence. A single truth could be expressed by philosophy and religion (Al-Talbi, 1993). Al-Farabi divided intellect into four main groups: a. potential intellect, b. actual intellect, c. acquired intellect and d. active intellect. Al-Farabi’s epistemology is based on the theory of emanation with the Active Intelligence. Ahmad (1988: 23) points out that by putting forth this theory of epistemology;

“Al-Farabi has egalitarianised the acquisition of knowledge because the Active Intelligence enlightens anyone and everyone who is prepared to receive its illumination. Thus, anyone who struggles hard is able to better himself/herself and acquire this highest degree of knowledge.”

Descartes proposed that whatever one clearly and distinctly perceived or understood was true; not just regarding ideas but of things represented by those ideas in the real world (Nolan, 2011). Descartes investigated truth first-off by releasing prejudices and by not trusting any of the old assumptions without interrogating their truth. Then, he identified truths which were recognized clearly when focusing intently on them; he accepted as true only those. Thus, he presumed some truths secure on which can be leaned upon, such as math and physics (Descartes 2010). He believed that senses could deceive us, hence, he did not trust in them. His epistemology is therefore based on doubt. Knowledge can only be found with doubt. He doubted everything and found existence in his famous maxim: “Cogito ergo sum,” or I think, therefore I am. He defined this sentence as followed:

“I was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search” (Descartes, 2008: 15).

Contrary to idealism, Locke developed the aphorism: “Neither principle nor ideas are innate.” The Mind does not know anything at birth (tabula rasa: blank slate). After birth, knowledge can be gained with experiment. Experiment can be divided into two parts: sensation and reflection. Any external objects can be understood through sensation. The operations of the mind such as perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, and willing, are the objects of reflection (Locke, 1690). Locke’s epistemology based on experiment and all knowledge comes from sensation or reflection. It is impossible to know anything except what experiment gives to us. Truth emerges when sensation and reflection get in agreement (Oktem, 2003). Locke divided qualities of material things into two parts, as “primary” and “secondary”. Primary qualities are like solidity, extension, figure, motion (or rest), and number. These are the reflection of mind as a perceiving subject. The secondary ones are like colors, sounds and tastes. They are qualities of body (Locke, 1690). Existence of primary qualities provides material substances’ presence and thus the possibility “true knowledge” emerges (Bravo, 2008).
Berkeley (2004) critiques Locke as regards quality distinction. He submits that there are not any distinctions in quality but rather they are mixed and blended together. The reality of primary quality is also valid for secondary. All qualities have relation perceiving subjects and there are no qualities out of a perceiving mind. The subjectivity of all qualities denies the existence of material substance (Ibid). Berkeley’s ontology is based on mind and ideas. Ideas are part of mind and they can live thanks to existence of it. Moreover, Berkeley’s definition of reality is composed of domain of thinking things and domain of unthinking things. Existence has different meanings in both domains. The meaning of existence is to be perceived in the domain of unthinking things. On the other hand, the meaning of existence is to perceive in the domain of thinking things (Ilodigwe, 2010).

Kant contributed greatly to the literature of epistemology by finding a middle ground between Descartes and Locke (Taskin, 2002). Kant’s epistemology is based around the key terms of analytic judgment, synthetic judgment and transcendent epistemology. Analytical judgment is a priori knowledge that is independent of experience but synthetic judgment is both a priori and a posteriori knowledge. A posteriori knowledge is dependent on experiment. Transcendental epistemology is about knowing objects, investigating non-empirical origins and exploring the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (Kitcher, 1995). Kant used critical thinking with both implementation of received doctrines and inherited thoughts, prejudices and traditions, to reach knowledge. In order to be objective, one should take into consideration others’ thoughts. Kant defined objectivity as the reality of considering others’ social and subjective natures (Howell, 2013).

Durkheim, Weber and Marx discuss permanent interaction between theoretical assumptions and objects of inquiry. Theories refer to a reality outside themselves. Besides, theoretical abstractions and reality have an eternally problematic relationship (Alfrod, 1998). Howell (2013) defined reality from two different perspectives: positivist perspective views reality as totally independent of humanity but phenomenological reality considers them to be intrinsically linked. Truth ensures a better understanding of reality. Truths like theories cannot remain constant forever; when truth and/or theories change, consequently, the nature of reality changes with them. Knowledge requires interpretations of facts derived from data. Then again, theory analyzes understandings extrapolated from data. Theory can be expressed through immutable laws at one extreme and social or construction at the other, reflecting reality, truth or knowledge. Howell (2013) also summarized four theoretical positions that show relation of knowledge, reality, truth and theory as seen in below.

**Theory and Paradigm of Inquiry**

Kuhn (1970) defined paradigm as sharing between the members of a scientific community. As the tool of paradigm manages to solve the problem it defines, science marches forward and makes a tremendous progress. Paradigms are based on ontological, epistemological and methodical assumptions. The responses to these three fundamental questions are interconnected to each other and each response affects the answer to all the other questions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).
Table 1
Truth and Reality (Howell, 2013: 17)

<table>
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<th>Position</th>
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| Correspondence Theory | - There is a clear relationship between truth/knowledge and reality.  
                          - Truth and knowledge correspond with something that actually exists and they are both universal and absolute.  
                          - Statements, thoughts and things are related to each other.  
                          - An objective reality exists and reflects through thoughts, symbols and numbers.  
                          - Positivism and post positivism support this view. |
| Coherence Theory  | - Truth, knowledge and theory fit with a coherent system.  
                          - Truth and knowledge are identified as the properties of a system of propositions in relation to a general system by theory.  
                          - There is a coherency between the general and specifics. - Positivism and post positivism support this view. |
| Pragmatism        | - Knowledge, truth and theory require to be verified through experience and application.  
                          - Knowledge, truth and theory are always fallible, incomplete or partial.  
                          - Theory tested through the community and confirmed through application in practical contexts.  
                          - Development of reality shaped by historical process.  
                          - Critical theory supports this position. |
| Consensual/Constructivist Theory | - Theory, knowledge, reality and truth are constructed through cultural and social terms.  
                          - Socially constructed and shaped by power struggles in the community.  
                          - There is not any external objective reality or system.  
                          - Theory, knowledge, reality and truth are considered contingent and based on human experience and human perception.  
                          - *Verum ipso facto* (truth in itself is constructed).  
                          - Constructivist and participatory support this position. |

*Denzin* and *Lincoln* (2005) categorize the types of paradigm inquiry as: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivist, and participatory. These paradigm inquiries ensure different interpretations on theory. Positivism and post-positivism see theory as an indication or statement of relationships between abstracted ideas with empirical observations that identify hypotheses via reliable tests (Howell, 2013). Technical and quantitative substantive theories are used in positivism (Lincoln et al., 2011) to verify *a priori* hypotheses. On the other hand, post-positivism focuses on falsifying *a priori* suppositions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Creswell (2013: 24) stated that “*Post positivism has the elements of being*
reductionistic, logical, empirical, cause-and-effect oriented, and deterministic based on a priori theories”.

Alternatively, in order to emphasize the connection between interpretation and the phenomenon under investigation, critical theory, constructivist and participatory paradigms use interpretive perspectives of theory. Subjective human develops theory in a historical and cultural context in critical theory. Constructivist paradigm has much similarity with critical theory. The interpretation of theory in constructivism is shaped by researchers’ experiences, views and background (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). Participatory paradigm and phenomenological approaches are linked with each other. Howell (2013: 100) stated this as “... the findings are co-created through practical and theoretical knowledge in the context of becoming”.

Theory in the Social Science

A scientific theory was defined in the book of Oxford Companion to Philosophy as:” An attempt to bind together in a systematic fashion the knowledge that one has of some particular aspect of the world of experience” (Honderich, 1995: 870). Theory has played fundamental role in the history of Social science’s development. Many theories change the direction of social science and give a new way to it based on their hypotheses and perspectives. Theory, discovery, development or meta-theorizing are important components of social science research. Theory develops pluralism, alternative choices and scenarios, discussion and communication, and increased awareness and understanding in social science (Howell, 2013). Different types of theory in terms of theory development, ideational formulation, normativism and levels of theory (grand, meso and substantive theory) are investigated in social science. The typology of theory in social science is showed in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Typology of Theory (Howell, 2013)

Individual theories mostly focus on cognition, behavior, learning, personality, and interpersonal interactions (Tavallaei and Talib, 2010) through considering empirical phenomenon in relation to non-empirical ones. Substantive theory utilizes experience in combination with selves or the individual researcher’s interpretive collation and synthesis between theory and practice. Meso-theory connects grand theory and substantive theory.
Grand theory gives a general idea about the subject. Philosophy requires total abstraction and limited relationships with practice.

**Conclusion**

Theory and practice are two sides of the same coin in a social inquiry (Howell, 2013). Accurate theoretical framework and theory provide good practice. Moreover, theory analyzes knowledge or truth which is derived from reality or practical/empirical situations and contexts. Kant (1995) investigated the relationship between theory and practice under three different conditions: \( a \) in morality in general, \( b \) in political right, and \( c \) in international right. Based on his analysis, if something is valid in theory, it will be valid in practice as well. Theory and practice should not be separated but should instead be reflected whole in the research.

Habermas (1974) surveyed three aspects of the relationship between theory and practice: \( a \), the empirical aspect of science, politics, and public opinion in advanced capitalistic social systems, \( b \), the epistemological aspect of knowledge and interest, and \( c \), the methodological aspect of a social theory. He found three functions which provide the mediation between theory and practice: firstly, the formation and extension of critical theorems which aim at true statements; secondly, the organization of enlightenment process which aims at authentic insights; and finally, the selection of appropriate strategies aiming at prudent decisions.

Finally, theory draws general frameworks and determines rules but it does not show how to implement which is why practical judgment is necessary (Rachels, 2001). Theory and practice have interrelation and should as a result complete each other in an inquiry. If a social inquiry does not have any theoretical background, it may only provide conditional results. Hence, the practical part of an inquiry must be built on a theoretical framework.

**Bibliography**


